

# Basic Principals of Biblical Interpretation (*Hermeneutics*)

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We rely on the so-called *Grammatical-Historical Method* to guide our understanding of Scripture. Essentially, this method is utilized to gain an accurate understanding of what scripture actually says – rather than interpretations that aren't directly supported by the grammar and historical context of the text. *We seek to uncover the original intent of the inspired Biblical writers.*

Believers should rely on their own careful study of God's words to guide their understanding. Commentaries, study Bibles and other tools are often helpful. However, the bulk of our study time should be spent with the actual Bible text. Importantly, we should remember that the Holy Spirit indwells, in part, for the purpose of guiding our understanding of Scripture!

## I. Gramatical Principals

1. *Examine the Context of the passage.* Seek to understand a passage in it's broader context. Use caution when looking-up individual verses. Allow the broader context to help guide your understanding of individual verses.
2. *Examine the grammar.*
  - a. *Look for connecting words* (e.g. and, therefore, etc). They connect ideas and help guide your proper understanding of related thoughts.
  - b. *Look for words that single contrasting ideas*, e.g. "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; **but** be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)

- a. *Examine the adjectives* (descriptive words). Allow them to inform your understanding. For example, the adjective “Holy” is used to describe the Spirit of God. “Holy Ghost” and “Holy Spirit” always refer to the third person of the Triune Godhead. However, “spirit” alone may or may not refer to the Holy Spirit. Allow the context to guide your interpretation.
- b. *Learn to understand the precise meaning of the pronouns*. For example, “ye” is the second-person plural form of you. Jesus told Nicodemus that “ye” must be born again. “Ye” makes it clear that everyone must be born again, i.e. not just Nicodemus!
- i. “T’s are singular”
    1. *Thou, Thee, Thy* are always 2<sup>nd</sup>-person singular
    2. *Thou* = subject form
    3. *Thee* = object form
    4. “*Thy*” shows possession
  - ii. “Y’s are plural”: *Ye, You, Your(s)* are always 2<sup>nd</sup>-person plural
    1. *Ye* = Subject form
    2. *You* = object form
    3. “*Your(s)*” shows possession
  - iii. John 3:7, 11, "Marvel not that I said unto THEE, YE must be born again." The message was spoken to the individual Nicodemus, but has wider application (to YE). Also see v. 11: "I say unto THEE...that YE receive not our witness."

*Allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.* Allow passages that are very clear in meaning to help guide your understanding of related passages that may be less clear.

Allow the “one body” of 1 Cor 12:13 to be understood in the context of the first use (1 Cor. 6:16). In context, we see that the passage deals with a spirit of unity and “united bodies”

## ***II. Historical principals***

1. ***Consider the type of Biblical literature being studied***, e.g. history (e.g. *Genesis*), poetry (e.g. *Song of Solomon*), prophecy (e.g. *Isaiah*), gospels (e.g. *Matthew*), epistles (e.g. *Romans*), eschatology (e.g. *Revelation*)
  - a. Be careful to determine between literal and figurative / metaphorical passages. The Biblical poetry books often employ figurative language to bring out very clear meaning. We seek to uncover the meaning pictured in the poetry.
2. ***Be aware of the dispensation of the passage.*** While believers have always been saved by grace through faith, God has obliged saved people to observe different obligations at different times in history. For example, in the past, God’s people were required to observe the Levitical Law. However, God no longer requires this of believers.
3. ***Apply an Understanding of Historical Context & Social Customs.*** A proper understanding of the social customs that were prominent when a passage was first written can help inform your understanding. For example, many have questioned why Matthew is the only of the four Gospels that appears to permit divorce in the case of “fornication.” (The remaining three gospels prohibit divorce, e.g. **Luke 16:18 reads** “*Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth*

*another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery."* This apparent contradiction may be resolved by examining the primary audience of Matthew (Jewish people) and their marriage customs. Importantly, we see that the Jewish marriage customs included betrothal period before the consummation of a marriage. Knowledge of this custom points helps yield an understanding that the "adultery exception" of Matthew likely only refers to fornication that occurs during the betrothal period, i.e. before the marriage is consummated.